In 1987, David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva introduced Appreciative Inquiry as a form of action research with the generative capacity to create a sense of possibility and to develop energizing ideas for novel action. They saw Appreciative Inquiry as a process of discovery and theorizing that truly brings out the life-generating essentials and potentials of organizational and social existence. They argued that the collective study of what gives life to a human system, rather than the more common diagnosis of its problems, will result in shared knowledge that enables social innovation. The appreciative approach to action research starts with an appreciation of current reality, is collaborative in nature and aspires to create knowledge that is provocative yet applicable. It embraces the social constructionist premise that words create worlds, and thus the belief that theory can be a catalyst for transformative action. This makes Appreciative Inquiry activist in its orientation. It encourages those who participate in research to work in the service of their vision of world betterment. Such visions may be inspired by the root metaphor that underlies the appreciative way of knowing, namely, that of social and organizational life as a miracle and mystery with endless possibility for discovery and change.

Appreciative Inquiry is commonly known as a strengths-based approach to organizational change, in which participants engage in conversations to explore the positive, life-giving core of their organization, to create images of future aspirations and to design new alternatives for action. Because of its focus on shared meaning making, Appreciative Inquiry as a change methodology is a form of dialogic organization development. Though positive change may seem more important than research in this practice-driven application, it remains clearly grounded in inquiry.

This entry discusses Appreciative Inquiry from a research perspective. It describes how researchers can take an appreciative stance, how collaborative inquiry enables organizational change and how Appreciative Inquiry becomes research for generative theory building.

The Spirit of Inquiry

To take an appreciative stance in inquiry means to see, illuminate and create what is extraordinary in ordinary life and practice. When this spirit of inquiry—a sense of wonder, curiosity and surprise—is awakened, fresh perceptions of reality may result in knowledge that interrupts and transforms the status quo.

The researcher in Appreciative Inquiry is not an objective outsider but someone who actively participates in the organizational setting that is being studied. When such relational engagement is undertaken with what Albert Schweitzer called a reverence for life, it may enable the open-minded sensitivity to appreciate also the more subtle richness in organizational dynamics. Inquiry itself can create a sense of wonder and surprise when the questions asked open new terrains for study and a different way of seeing leads to unexpected insights. When research is conducted with an appreciative eye, it connects an intricate understanding of the best there is with a bold imagination of what might become. The power of the imaginative mind is needed to create the generative knowledge that Appreciative Inquiry promotes. Imagination brings vigour to the study of organizational reality, and together with appreciation, it gives permission to be daring and truly alive in inquiry.

Appreciative Inquiry asks for both reflexivity and finesse. The researcher needs to be upfront about the life-centric bias of the approach, to be aware of personal assumptions and images of the good and to be a skilled facilitator of this collaborative change methodology.

In sum, Appreciative Inquiry is a way of knowing and being that illuminates the possible in human systems. Its spirit of inquiry invites both action researchers and organizational members to study and shape the life-giving potential of the wondrous organizational settings in which they participate.
Appreciative Inquiry is based on the constructionist notion that social reality is maintained and transformed through processes of shared meaning making. Simply put, what one talks about and pays attention to will grow. From this perspective, inquiry is an intervention rather than a diagnostic step to prepare plans for change implementation. When inquiry itself is seen to induce the wanted change, it really matters what topics are studied and how, who is included and listened to and how insights are developed and shared.

An appreciative change initiative will commonly start with an interview process in which participants inquire into topics that are of high interest to them. Such topics are framed in language that affirms what one wants to see more of. Affirmative topics inform the questions that participants ask each other to bring out life-giving qualities and future potentials. Inclusive engagement—of ideally the whole system—in this process is important to illuminate the full spectrum of experiences and viewpoints and to create the sense of relatedness that will nurture change. Questions are carefully crafted to invite storytelling and conversation that explores, connects and energizes. Stories give rich insights into lived experience, and their sharing builds the relationship between teller and listener. Rather than establishing factual truth, the aim of appreciative interviewing is to join the other in creating shared understandings of the possibility for novel action.

What does the organization say? After the interviews are conducted, participants share and study the stories, remarks, wishes and future images that they have taken note of. This sharing is part of the discovery phase, the purpose of which is to illuminate the organization’s positive core, the factors that are considered to be special qualities and strengths. New insights, exemplar stories and quotes are assembled and communicated in ways that resonate and evoke a sense of possibility. During the dream phase, participants use discoveries and their imagination to picture bold future aspirations. Will it work? In the design phase, inquiry is focused on shaping actionable ideas from articulated dreams into concrete designs for action. Appreciative Inquiry as a strengths-based approach to change ideal results in workable knowledge that guides experiments with innovative ideas in daily practice. In the destiny phase, cycles of experimentation and reflection may lead to transformative action, collective learning and new topics for inquiry.

Appreciative Inquiry as intervention enhances the collective capacity for change by using and strengthening the existing cognitive and relational capabilities of a group or organization. Through appreciation, imagination and exploration, participants can develop fresh knowledge about their practice that enables them to co-create something clearly different and better.

**Generative Theorizing**

With their introduction of Appreciative Inquiry, Cooper-rider and Srivastva answered Kenneth Gergen’s call for generative theorizing. The focus of such theory development is knowledge that can help transform social reality. Rather than establishing and verifying conventional truths about what currently exists in human systems, the researcher wants to interrupt common assumptions by exploring and inspiring what is emergent and possible. How does Appreciative Inquiry lead to theoretical knowledge with such a generative capacity?

From an engagement with Appreciative Inquiry as change methodology, questions and topics may emerge that can lead to the development of transferable knowledge. Over time and across situations, certain themes may catch the attention and curiosity of the researcher. How is it, for instance, that moments of crisis are appreciated as high-point experiences in some organizations? Such questions may lead to a secondary analysis of the material that was collected during the appreciative interviews. They may also result in a conceptual framing that allows the researcher to join timely theoretical conversations. Next to knowledge development around substantive themes, Appreciative Inquiry facilitation may spark theorizing around process questions of organizational change. The sharing of stories about an organization’s positive core, for instance, can be studied to understand the dynamics of organizational identity work.

Both content and process questions that arise from Appreciative Inquiry initiatives can guide studies in which
the researcher uses a more or less traditional methodology. Indeed, more conventional studies can explore positive topics such as organizational flourishing or use an appreciative perspective during interviews or for purposes of evaluation. In such research, however, a concern for diagnostic rigour and predictable patterns may clash with the relational, constructionist and provocative nature of Appreciative Inquiry as generative theorizing.

Appreciative Inquiry is based on the premise that knowledge creation is a relational endeavour. The researcher needs to engage with others and otherness to develop novel insights. Such relational engagement can take a variety of forms. Where topics emerge from the facilitation of a change initiative, one can continue to work with a group of co-researchers that represents the whole system. But to understand the intricate qualities and dynamics of organizational settings, it may be more conducive to engage a small group of professionals who have an immediate interest in the research topic and can explore it with practice-based finesse. Once the researcher starts to zoom in on such micro practices, relationality can also be translated in how one personally engages with the research material. A choice to participate directly in what one studies may then guide a phenomenological exploration of the experience of generativity in organizational and social life.

Its underlying constructionist principle not only makes Appreciative Inquiry a dialogic approach to change, it also invites research that uses discourse analysis as its methodology. The focus of such analysis is on language and on meaning-making processes that influence the scope of possible actions. A researcher who studies organizational settings through an appreciative discursive lens may look at the qualities of life-giving conversations, the stories that can change perspectives on what is currently feasible, the occurrence and expansion of positive communication in a specific organization or the role of the media in articulating the nascent narratives that inspire repertoires for innovative practice. To be generative, such studies ideally also stay true to Appreciative Inquiry’s relational quality. The researcher will, for instance, safeguard the holistic nature of stories and the interactive character of the production and use of organizational texts.

Appreciative Inquiry invites a scholarship of dislodgement and transformation and encourages research that leads to provocative outcomes. What can the researcher do to create knowledge that provokes novel action? One approach may be to look for positive deviance in both practice and research data. In practice, it means studying exemplar cases of unusual yet wanted innovation. In data analysis, it asks for an openness to value the outliers that may inform surprising insights. To translate such deviant observations into plausible conceptualizations, the researcher needs theoretical imagination to propose what might be possible and replicable in other situations. Theories that evoke action are not only plausible but do also have emotional appeal. A researcher who wants to have a generative impact will, therefore, strive to write about inquiry outcomes in artful ways that resonate and inspire. Such writing may awaken a spirit of inquiry and a sense of possibility in those who read them.

To summarize, Appreciative Inquiry was introduced as a life-centric approach to action research. When it lives up to its full generative potential, it connects inquiry at the three interrelated levels of a personal appreciative stance, a collaborative search for constructive change and the creation of theoretical knowledge that transfers to other situations because it provokes and enables organizational and social transformation.

See also: Appreciative Inquiry; organization development; social constructionism; strengths-based theory and practice; transferability

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Further Readings


